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A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPTION OF ETHNICITY IN AFRICA AS AN IDEOLOGY OF INTER-ELITE COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT The African elite has the advantage in the competition for top government positions and other scarce socio-political and economic resources. The patron-client system which the elite controls, in most cases using the state apparati, provides the major basis for arguing that ethnicity is an ideology of inter-elite competition. While agreeing that the elite is fragmented enough to be masters of the ethnic strategy in a situation where the rest of the society is largely illiterate, this paper argues that the conception of ethnicity as an "ideology" of inter-elite competition is too limited and inadequate. First, ethnicity is not just an ideology; it is a reality of every multiethnic society, and this reality manifests both in cultural and non-cultural ways. Second, ethnicity, as an effective strategy and major manipulative tool in the competition for societal resources, is not an exclusive preserve of the elite. It is also available to the non-elite who are empirically adept at what I call an elite-challenging ethnicity.

Key Words: Ethnicity; Ethnic group; Elite; Ideology; Identity; Class.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular perspectives in the study of ethnicity is the elite perspective which posits that ethnicity is an ideology employed by the elites to further their constitutive interests. Ethnicity is, as Sklar (1967: 6) says, "a mask for class privilege." Remarkably, this is one perspective in which the conclusions of radical and bourgeois scholars do not differ too much. This is little surprising, considering that the analysis of ethnicity in class terms is the vogue and that, in theoretical terms, this mode of analysis marks a major advance over earlier modes which were mostly Eurocentric and treated ethnicity as a mark of backwardness.(1) In particular, the elite perspective represents one of the several attempts to subject ethnicity to universal and scientific frameworks of analysis. This, in part, explains the popularity of the perspective.

This paper is a critical examination of this popular perspective. As I see it, the controversy which the adherents of the elite perspective have succeeded in raising, and which is likely to remain for a long time to come, is whether ethnicity is unreal (which is what its conception as an "ideology" suggests)(2) or, at best, real only to the extent that it is elite-directed. Such points of view may be self-evidently convincing, but I am persuaded that their reductionist character oversimplifies ethnic analysis and the problems posed by ethnicity itself. These are some of the points I raise in this paper from a largely African framework. The elite perpectitive of

ethnicity has been applied mostly to the African situation where concrete class structures are in the process of coming into being but have been distorted so far because of fragmentation introduced by ethnicity and other cleavages.

ETHNICITY: WHAT IS IT?

Although scholars differ on how best to define and characterise ethnicity because it is a relatively new concept for which comparative utility is still being sought,[3] there is general agreement on a few points which are germane to understanding the phenomenon. First, it is agreed that though ethnicity is a derivative of the ethnic group, it only occurs in situations involving more than one ethnic group or identity with a clear "us" and "they" differentiation. Second, to fully grasp the meaning of ethnicity, one has to start with defining and identifying the ethnic groups actually involved. This is particularly important because of the systemic differences in the definition of ethnicity (and ethnic group) across societies (Porter, 1975; Burgess, 1978; Mckay, 1982; Osaghae, 1989). Third, ethnicity is a problematic phenomenon whose character is conflictual rather than consensual. In fact, it has been found to be positively correlated with political instability (cf. Cox, 1970; Barrows, 1976).[4] Finally, it is agreed that no matter the level of development, ethnicity is a political force in every society that is not monoethnic (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975; Nagata, 1976; Smith, 1981). It is for this reason that students of ethnicity have searched for universal theoretical perspectives for ethnic analysis. The elite perspective which I examine in this paper is one of the fruits of this search.

Having enumerated the features of ethnicity on which scholars agree, let us now see what ethnicity really is. It may be defined as a conscious behaviour based on ethnic identity or loyalty in a competitive situation involving more than one such identity, which is aimed at furthering the interests of the individual and/or his group. In political terms, it refers to the ethnic-identity based behaviour which seeks, in a competitive setting, to capture political power (at the micro level) and state power (at the macro level). Thus defined, it is clear that even though ethnicity is a derivative of ethnic pluralism, ethnic pluralism by itself does not lead to ethnicity. The etiology of ethnicity—its why and how—is an adjunct of its definition. At the same time, because ethnic pluralism became a necessary condition for its existence; the definition of the ethnic group is also an integral part of defining ethnicity. It is this latter definition that I shall consider first because it is the building block of ethnicity.

Depending on a researcher's objective, an ethnic group may be defined with a behavioural or non-behavioural emphasis. The non-behavioural emphasis dominated anthropological studies for a long time, and involved the conception of ethnic groups as "tribes" which were isolated and marked by objective diacritic like language, culture, territory and political organisation. In the words of Van den Berghe (1974: 121): "To the Western anthropological tradition, ethnicity was an inventory of culture traits divorced of its political and economic structure." Barth's (1969) epochal work on the dynamic character of ethnic groups and, especially, of their boundaries, broke this anthropological tradition and drew attention to the

behavioural component of the ethnic group. The behavioural emphasis, on the other hand, has to do with the definition of the ethnic group in highly subjective terms as focus for the identification, loyalty and behavior of its members. In the final analysis however, ethnic groups cannot be defined by a behavioural or non-behavioural emphasis, but as a composite of both. If nothing else, an ethnic identity cannot be assumed if there are no (objective) identifiers. Recognising this, I find the 'composite' definition offered by Kasfir (1976) quite appropriate: An ethnic group is the product of (1) a number of underlying objective characteristics associated with common descent like language and common culture; (2) which constitute the basis of identity as defined by 'insiders' who belong to the group and 'outsiders' who do not belong to the group but identify it as different from their own groups; (3) which generally become the basis for mobilising group consciousness and solidarity, and which, (4) in certain situations, result in political activity.

The other aspect of defining ethnicity is to account for its salience or existence. As I have pointed out, ethnic pluralism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethnicity. The sufficient condition is that ethnic differences are mobilised and manipulated in pursuance of personal or group interests, and this is what the etiology of ethnicity seeks to explain. The point of departure in considering the etiology is to emphasise the situational character of ethnicity. It is not true that all political relations in multiethnic politics are obdurately or pervasively ethnic, as assumed a long time ago by some theorists (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972; Lever, 1979; Van Amersfoort & Van der Wusten, 1981). Rather, ethnicity is a situational phenomenon depending on the issues at stake in a particular situation and the identities assumed by the actors. Its salience also varies in degrees from one situation to another, again depending on the stakes involved (Weingrod, 1979; Okamura, 1981; Chazan, 1982; Cohen, 1974). Thus, it is latent in some situations and manifest in others or, in some, mild and in others' violent. As Cohen (1974: 14–15) puts it, "We must remember that ethnicity is a matter of degree. There is ethnicity and ethnicity. The constraint that custom exercises on the individual varies from case to case.... In some situations, it leads to violence and bloodshed." Even so, Enloe (1980: 6) warns that "the outside observer should not mistake low saliency for the disappearance of ethnic conciousness altogether. The unmobilised ethnic group is an ethnic group in hibernation. If conditions pose opportunities or threats for which ethnic ties are germane, ethnicity may once again take on vitality and political significance."

The full implication of the situational conception of ethnicity is that it is a conscious, voluntary, functional and rational form of behaviour which is calculated to bring about desired ends in situations where it is adopted. Or, as Patterson (1975) would say, ethnicity is a "rational strategy" chosen to advance the interest of the individual as the situation dictates. Again, this contradicts an earlier popular notion that ethnicity is an involuntary mode of behaviour which flows from the "givens" of life as a result of a "spiritual affinity" which binds members of a primordial group (Geertz, 1963; Isaacs 1975).[5] This notion has been rejected for its psychological reductionism, disregard for the political and economic milieu of ethnicity, and its inability to account for the changing character of ethnicity under

social change. However, some unrepentant Western scholars characterise ethnicity in Africa in such morbid terms (Gans, 1979; Isaacs, 1975).

Concern with explaining the salience of ethnicity—its sudden rise to prominence as well as its sudden, even if temporary, disappearance—is relatively recent. It used to be thought that ethnicity was a "natural" phenomenon whose only explanation lay in the fact of its being innate to the individual's sense of belonging and pride. Scholars did not even need to bother too much about ethnicity because it was only to be found in backward societies, and was expected to wither away with modernisation. Two developments however combined to expose the wrongness of this view. First, contrary to expectations, the modernisation process did not result in "detribalisation" (the expectation was that ethnicity being "non-rational" will easily give way to rational forms of behaviour based on class and party ties as modernisation progressed). Instead, it seems to have had the opposite effect, rekindling long dormant 'primordial' loyalties and fostering the dismemberment of established states, rather than promoting their integration. The second was the more recent finding that ethnicity is situational and the implication of this—the need to explain the fluid and intermittent character of ethnicity. Both contemporaneous developments indicated that, without denying its independent force, ethnicity should be treated as a dependent variable if it is to be fully understood. This is the backdrop of several schools in the etiology of ethnicity.

There are several perspectives which explain ethnicity. These include the scarce resources perspective, the social change/adaptive mechanism school, the Marxist perspective, the neo-Marxist perspective and, of course, the elite perspective.[6] As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, the elite perspective, which is my major concern, is one of the most popular of these perspectives. One reason for this is that its major assumptions bestride the other perspectives.[7] In what follows in this paper we shall examine the thesis of the elite perspective, and, in the light of its applicability to the African situation, attempt a critique of the perspective.

THE ELITE PERSPECTIVE

The point to begin with is to distinguish between the elite perspective and the class perspective. Some authors take elite and class to mean one and the same thing (Markovitz, 1977). For others who accept the radical-liberal distinctions in the usage of these terms, a class is a highly self-conscious, economically determined group of people who share common (class) interests, while an elite is a group (or category) of people who occupy leading and directing roles in society which are not necessarily economically determined and whose members do not necessarily share common (class) interests (Brass, 1985). A further distinction is that while an elite is by definition a privileged minority, a class could either be privileged or unprivileged. In relation to ethnicity however, these distinctions become blurred as both the elite and class perspectives hold that ethnicity is an ideology employed by the privileged members of society (elite, class) to further their constitutive interests. But even so, the elite perspective offers a wider scope for ethnic analysis than does the class perspective which, in strict terms, takes ethnic analysis and class analysis

to be mutually exclusive, and posits that class analysis is more realistic than ethnic analysis and, hence, superior to it (Magubane, 1969: 538).[8] The elite perspective, on the other hand, does not run into this "fallacy of objectification (Brass, 1985; 11)" because it does not insist that class is more real than the ethnic group. Rather, it seeks to integrate "class" and ethnic analyses by positing that ethnicity is an ideology employed by the privileged members of a society in their competition for the society's resources, especially power. True, there are variants of class analysis in which this position is upheld (Skler, 1967), but such "liberal" class analysis lacks the punch of pure Marxist analysis. To avoid any conceptual confusion as we go on, I should emphasise the point that "elite" as used in the elite perspective of ethnicity is not meant to be a substitute for class but to refer to formations within ethnic groups and classes that often play critical roles in ethnic mobilisation.

In spite of these distinctions, the major thesis of the elite perspective is quite similar to that of Marxist class analysts who give a place to ethnicity in their analysis. The thesis is that ethnicity is epiphenomenal, as its existence is a function of the manipulations of the masses by the elite or privileged class. In other words, ethnicity should be analysed, within the framework of a "sociology of dependence (Van den Berghe, 1974)," as a dependent variable rather than a principal political force. This implies 1) that ethnicity is not an ideology of the masses who do not manipulate others (not even themselves); 2) that ethnicity will lose its political salience if the elites reach a consensus, or if they transform themselves from being a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself; and 3) that ethnicity is more a political phenomenon than a cultural one. These are some of the issues I address later.

Let us now dwell on the elite perspective. We shall begin by defining the term elite. According to Pareto (1968: 8), "Elite should be treated as a value free term, meaning those who score highest on scales measuring any social value or commodity (utility) such as power, riches, knowledge." Bottomore (1976: 14) has also written that "The term 'elite(s)' is now generally applied in fact, to functional, mainly occupational, groups which have high status (for whatever reason) in a society...." Elite then, is usually defined in relation to the non-elite and is composed of those who occupy leading positions and roles in all facets of society—the political leaders, top civil servants and bureaucrats, top military officers and academicians, leading professionals, businessmen and other top members of the merchant class. Hopkins (1971) for example, identifies the Tanzanian elite as comprising members of the national legislative assembly, government administrators and top ranking people in business, labour, education and the military, though he excluded the non-government elite because of their large non-Tanzanian composition.

These privileged members of society provide leadership and are the main aspirants to, and competitors for, political power and privileges. It is for these reasons that Mosca (1939) describes the elite as the ruling class which is "always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolises power, and enjoys the advantages that power brings," and the non-elite as "the more numerous class" which is "directed and controlled" by the elite. The tools of control and manipulation have been variously called political formula (Mosca), derivation (Pareto), myth or ideology and usually consist of "a set of general moral and political principles which the society at large will be prepared to acknowledge as

having universal validity" but actually aims at furthering the selfish interests of the elites (Parry, 1980: 56). To complete the definition of elite I should add that just as there are different sectors and segments in society, so are there different elites. We can classify these elites according to the criterion germane to our interest, according to subsystems (e. g. political elite and economic elite), cleavages (ethnic elite, religious elite) or according to class (e. g. working class elite). This point of the heterogeneity of the elite is very important for our analysis as I shall show shortly.

The elite perspective, in general, rests on the assumption that society is elite-directed, and that elite-challenging acts are symptomatic of a malfunctioning society (Inglehart, 1983).[9] Since Plato and Aristotle,[10] elite theorists have continued to emphasise the reality-creating functions and vanguardist role of the elite in society. It is the elite that moves society and makes its history. The elite mode of analysis involves accounting for how the elite does this. There are two models of elite analysis. The first, which I shall call the hegemonic model assumes a class-for-itself elite which is a closeknit minority that acts on a single impulse which is the collective interest of the members. The second model, which I call the pluralist model, sees the elite as consisting of diverse organised minorities obeying diffuse and often conflicting impulses. Writing from a perspective of democratic pluralism which assumes elite plurality, Bachrach (1967: 16) says the major distinction between the two models is that "the emphasis shifts from manipulation and exploitation of the masses by the elite [in the hegemonic model] to the limitation and control of elites within the ruling class by the alignment of differing political forces in separate and opposing political institutions." A much more important distinction for our purpose is that while the hegemonic model emphasises elite cohesion (consensus), the pluralistic model emphasises the competitive (conflictual) aspects of inter-elite relations. The latter model informs the elite perspective of ethnicity which is our concern in this paper. I should add however, that whenever the elite are found, they are assumed to possess group consciousness, coherence and self-perpetuating will.[11] "If the group does not act as a unified body," Parry (1980: 32) has written, "it is less an elite than a category of 'top persons' in the particular sphere in question."

There are several ways to categorise the elites or elite groups in society. One popular way is to classify them according to the major institutions in society (Hewitt, 1981). So we have the political elite, social elite, economic elite, traditional elite, military elite, bureaucratic elite and so on, depending on how general or specific we want to be. Inter-elite competition within this framework involves inter-sectoral struggle such as found in the now less popular thesis that military intervention in the new states results from the struggle for power between the bureaucratic elite and the military elite. Another classificatory scheme ranks elites in order of position, influence and power—governing elite, non-governing elite, top elite, who's who elite, etc.—and sees inter-elite competition in terms of inter-rank struggles (Deutsch, 1974; Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939). A third way to classify elites, which is the one adopted in this paper sees the elites as divided according to the cleavages which exist in society. These cleavages are basically those described by Geertz (1963) as the "givens" of life—blood and kinship ties, ethnic group, region, religion, and caste. Every group that had differentiated according to the

relevant cleavage has its elite who, in competition with elites from other groups, exploit these differences by mobilising ethnic loyalties to further their interests: "When elite in conflict come from different cultural, linguistic or religious groups, the symbolic resources used (in their struggle or competition) will emphasise those differences (Brass, 1985: 30)."[12] This is the basic gist of the conception of ethnicity as an ideology of inter-elite competition. The conception holds that "ethnicity entails the activation of the cultural markers of a group, which may be primordially rooted, by political elites to mobilise ethnic-based support in their conflict with other similarly placed elites under conditions of incorporation of the group into a larger sociopolitical unit or of competition for scarce and valued societal resources (Mozaffar, 1986: 4)."

Central to the inter-elite competition thesis of ethnicity, as to most other schools of ethnogenesis, is the assumption that ethnicity does not assume political salience except when it is articulated and manipulated by privileged members of society, the main aspirants to and competitors for power, to further their interests. To this extent, Brass (1985: 12) defines the elites as "leadership segments with concrete characteristics and statuses, whose actions are critical in determining whether or not such categoric groups as...ethnic communities will be mobilised for political purposes." The elites are aided in this process by the marked inequalities which exist among the groups in terms of development and opportunities of development. This makes their task easier because, in the name of bettering the lot of the group and/or catching up with others, the elites succeed in recruiting the masses by promoting the elite interest as the common interest. Indeed, adherents of the scarce resources school of ethnicity posit that ethnicity would not become a political force except when people find themselves subject to "structural inequalities" and perceive political and economic gains as a reward for political mobilisation along ethnic lines (Cross, 1977; Young, 1976). This is especially true of African and other third world states where the state dominates the economic sphere and is, as such, the coveted prize of all political competition. As one author puts it, "So important have been the rewards of controlling the state as a means of determining the allocation of economic and social resources that the fear of political exclusion held by minority ethnic groups has resulted in severe ethnic tensions. Loss of control of the Central government does not simply mean a period in the political wilderness, it spells total economic disaster (Stone, 1983: 90)."

Another reason why the elites find ethnicity an expedient ideology is, as neo-Marxist scholars of the internal colonialist genre argue, that in the modern (capitalist) state, ethnic struggles are more pervasive and dangerous than are class struggles. Consequently, the state is generally more responsive to ethnic than to class pressures (McRoberts, 1979; Wallerstein, 1979). According to Wallerstein (1979: 187), the capitalist world economy and imperialist state expension have led to uneven distribution of state resources and valued employment opportunities among ethnic groups. Therefore, Wallerstein concludes, the essence of the modern state is not its relative autonomy, but its role as a distributor of resources unequally among ethnic groups. The discriminatory consequences of this heighten ethnic tensions especially on the part of disadvantaged, 'backward', or 'oppressed' groups. This partly explains why elite accommodation models such as consocia-

tional democracy and distributive policies such as reverse or protective discrimination, affirmative action, quota system, federal character and so on heighten ethnic conflicts rather than pacify them especially at the initial stages.[13]

We shall conclude this section of the paper by looking at two critical assumptions which underlie the elite perspective of ethnicity. First, as in most other variants of elite theory, there is an implicit assumption that the elite in every ethnic group is more self conscious and organised than the masses and is therefore able to mobilise and lead the ethnic community. In Africa where the masses are illiterate, apathetic and passive, this assumption has more than a conceptual significance. Second, the elite thesis will be meaningless unless we also assume that the ethnic group functions like a formal or informal interest group. In making this assumption cognisance is taken of the analytical problems posed by the conception of ethnic groups as interest groups (Brass, 1985: 10–11) as well as the fact that if the interest group approach were to be strictly followed, many ethnic groups will not qualify to be called groups at all. But, at the same time, superior organisational skills cannot be assumed on the part of the elites without a prior assumption that the ethnic group is an interest group with recognisable goals (defined by the elites). Indeed, if we look closely, we see that politically relevant ethnic communities are the organised groups. In Africa the famous "tribal" progressive unions as well as ethnic political parties quickly come to mind. In whatever way one looks at it, this organisational assumption is important because it gives ethnicity a basis.

THE ELITE PERSPECTIVE IN THE AFRICAN SITUATION

The elite perspective in general, and the ethnic version of it in particular, is believed to be most applicable to the situation in Africa and the third world where class structures are yet to solidify and where the vast majority of the peoples are illiterate and unaware. This makes it easy for the elite to manipulate them. The applicability and appropriateness of the ideological conception of ethnicity to the inter-elite competition are strengthened by the fact that the elite in individual African states is fragmented along ethnic lines, a fact which partly explains the failure of a hegemonic national elite to emerge. The only hegemonic elites are sectional (ethnic, religious, regional, etc.) elites such as the Northern Nigeria elite described by Ekeh (1989).

The fragmentation and sectionalisation of the elite in Africa are popularly attributed to the *divide et impera* policies of the various colonial authorities. It is a mark of this that the most pronounced (elite) ethnic dissension is to be found in ex-British territories like Nigeria where this policy was pursued most. There is little merit in pointing out that the elite which were cut off from the masses by their Western education were nurtured and fostered, even created, by the colonial regime mainly to serve the needs of the regime (Ake, 1981). One of these needs was the discouragement of national cohesion, to lay the grounds for neo-colonial control afrer independence. Granted that this was the fatal legacy of colonialism, I think the point which authors have not sufficiently emphasised is that, ostensibly as

part of their collaborative disposition towards the colonialists, the elites found the legacy expedient.

True indeed, the colonial authors instigated and in some cases, administratively created ethnic groups as we know them today (Apthorpe, 1968). The British authorities, for one, devoted time to labeling and classifying ethnic groups and this strengthened and sharpened ethnic differences. In Uganda, through this classification strategy, the British generalised and expanded the Ankole community by extending the authority of the pre-colonial state over many other principalities. Similar cases are seen in Buganda and Bunyoro (Segal & Doornbos, 1976) and the Hausa/Fulani in Nigeria. By contrast, in some other places, pre-colonial spheres of influence were reduced and new ethnic identities were thereby given expression. A case in point is the old Benin empire which was reduced to Benin-city, thereby freeing the Esan, Ivbiasako, Ika and others and foisting 'new' ethnic identities on them, complete with administrative territories.

In spite of the 'havoc' wreaked by the colonial authorities, the point that should be emphasised is that the elites were not averse to the ethnic infrastructure and, in fact, they did much to instigate ethnic consciousness, foster 'internal' ethnic unity, and create 'modern' ethnic groups as we know them today. The major tools they employed in this process of were three. First, capitalising on the works already done by missionary groups and colonial administrators in standardising vernacular languages, the elite foisted common languages which brought together groups with close dialects.[14] Until today, language remains the major ethnic diacritic in Africa (Nnoli, 1978). Second, they seized on extant myths or invented, fabricated, or manipulated through generalisation, myths of common descent or what Nagata (1976: 244) calls "charter myths" to foster common destinies for peoples who could lay no claim to actual kinship relations.[15] The Oduduwa myth (Yoruba) and the Bayajidda legend (Hausa) are examples of such charter myths. The Oduduwa myth was the main point in the effort by Egbe Omo Oduduwa to foster Yoruba unity (Arifalo, 1986). Finally, the elites cashed in on the slightest opportunities to antagonise rival outgroups, thereby sharpening ethnic consciousness and differentiation—the 'us' vs 'they'.[16] This completed the process of ethnicisation.

These facts have led Ekeh (1975: 105) to conclude that "ideologies and myths do have reality-creating functions, and the corporate character now attributed to the various ethnic groups is the reality that flowed from the ideoligies and myths invented by the bourgeoisie to consolidate their parcels of influence." Taken literally, the notion of "reality-creating" formation implies that present-day ethnicity and ethnic groups may just be unreal or, at best, categories which did not previously exist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Elsewhere, I have debunked that part of this proposition which suggests that present-day ethnic groups and relations are simply new creations—whether of the elites (Ekeh) or the colonisers (Apthorpe)—by demonstrating that they are, in their present forms, products of the continuities and changes primordial groups have undergone from and through pre-colonial and colonial times to the present social formations (Osaghae, 1989). I further emphasised that no matter how much ethnic groups and relations may have been fabricated, refurbished and manipulated (by the elites) to meet present needs and fit present circumstances, the depth of their origins and development has too

often been underestimated by the over-emphasis on the vanguardist role of the elite.

If the reality-creating role of the elite is not over-stated or over-simplified, no serious damage is done to the argument that it was the elites who were the competitors for the privileges and opportunities offered by the 'modernisation' of society especially for top government positions that propelled ethnic political behaviour.[17] This is especially true of, and has become more acute in, the postcolonial period when the state and its control have become the *raison d'etre* of all political competition. As a demonstration of the applicability of the elite perspective to the African situation, let us examine two aspects of the competition for power and resources to which the perspective has been popularly applied.

The first is in the area of party politics and elections. Analyses of party politics and elections in Africa which do not emphasise their ethnic character are quite rare. In virtually all cases, the directing role of the elite is emphasised (Kasfir, 1976). The formation of political parties and campaigns for elections, Dudley (1973: 33) affirms, "entailed creating a political self from the social identity which inclusion in the membership of the particular culture area offered and, to do this, the educated elite had to draw on the language of primordialism and communal parochialism for the terms of political discourse." In relation to electoral behaviour, the most popular thesis is that the individual votes as a member of an ethnic community whose party choice is determined, not by pre-existing cleavages and sentiments, but by competition among rival elites of the groups (Post, 1963; Vincent, 1971; Leys, 1975; Cohen, 1979; LaFontaine, 1965; Austin, 1961). As class ties are fragile, the political elite holds on tightly to the ethnic strategy as their major qualification for laying a claim to power. Their position is aptly borne out by Awolowo's insistence on the utility of ethnic leadership: "I pity the ignorance of those who believe that I can become a leader of Nigeria only if I renounce my leadership of the Yorubas. I could not become a leader of the country if I were rejected by those among whom I was born. What would be my credentials for ruling the whole country if I failed with a small group? (Awolowo, 1981)."

The second aspect is appointments to top government positions. Largely because of the centrality of the state—as the "means of production" and allocator of desired benefits and privileges—competition for top goverment positions as well as the favour of the government is very fierce among the elite. They lack a material base which they depend on the goodwill of the state to get and, without this base, they cannot maintain the patron-client relationships which sustain their privileged positions. The government is therefore the centre piece of their competition. In this competition, elites from disadvantaged groups have alleged domination, discrimination and oppression on the part of the more advantaged groups and have struggled to remain privileged. It is the awareness that the elite cannot maintain their positions if they are not guaranteed access to state power that has led to a regulation of this competition through rules of the game embodied in various ethnic arithmetic formulas. One example is the federal character principle in Nigeria which Dudley (1982: 62) asserts was devised to ameliorate inter-elite acrimony over top government positions which heightened political instability in the past.

It is clear enough that the elite perspective of ethnicity provides a useful framework for analysing ethnic relations in Africa. Its major point is that it exposes the actual worshippers of the idol of ethnicity. The perspective does not assume as do some others (plural society, for example) that ethnicity is *sui generis*. It further makes the important point that since ethnic and class relations and conflicts are usually geared towards the same ends, it will be partial and inadequate analysis to ignore or underestimate the role of class forces in ethnicity. In practical terms, for the most part, class and ethnic forces intersect and are mutually reinforcing. This is what informs Gordon's (1964) "ethclass" approach to ethnic analysis.[18] So, we ought not to underestimate the class context of ethnicity or the ethnic context of class, although "The tendency among Marxists to read class interest behind ethnic movements is far more common than any tendency among ethnic analysts to read ethnic sentiments behind class movements (Brass, 1985: 13)." While acknowledging this point, the suggestion that ethnic analysis is simply incidental to class (or, for that matter, elite) analysis, should be rejected because "to the extent that a society is divided into both ethnic groups and into classes, neither of the two kinds of groups can be reduced to the other. Ethnicity is not simply a minor complication or special case of class, nor can ethnicity be understood outside the total context of inequalities which includes class (Van den Berghe, 1974: 123)."

This is a convenient point at which to begin a critique of the elite perspective of ethnicity because there is a suggestion that, outside of the elite framework, ethnicity will not exist or will be unreal. Is this the case?

IS ETHNICITY (ONLY) AN IDEOLOGY OF INTER-ELITE COMPETITION?

The answer is an emphatic no because ethnicity is much more than an ideology of inter-elite competition. Let us begin by rejecting, in its entirety, an insinuation that if ethnicity is not an elite-begotten ideology, its correlates are negative: 1) that ethnicity lacks relative autonomy and is therefore a wholly dependent variable, and 2) that ethnicity cannot be a non-elite or elite-challenging phenomenon. These views are highly distorted and misleading. First, while it is possible for the linguistic and cultural aspects of ethnicity to be overshadowed by the political and economic conflicts based on them, it is not true that they do not *sui generis* result in ethnic conflicts (and these, not necessarily directed by the elites). In the USSR, the problem of the "national question" involves the integration of linguistic minorities (Farberov, 1980). In Canada and Belgium, language competition has been one of the main grounds of ethnic mobilisation (Lieberson, 1970; Olsak, 1982). A similar situation exists in India (Das Gupta, 1970) while in the USA, ethnic diacritic remain crucial (Gans, 1979). In Africa where ethnicity retains a highly primordial character, it is relatively autonomous in aspects like culture, language, territory and other markers which permeate class and other group structures. Above all, ethnocentricism or pride in one's ethnic identity remains one of the propelling forces in ethnic conflicts. Indeed, for most Africans, the ethnic community is the only real entity worth dying for, and this fact is emphasised in folktales, songs and

cultural practices. In many cases, ethnic boundaries have been defended largely on the grounds of group pride.

The point in all this, of course, is that there are ethnic residues that do not depend on class configuration. In fact, in many cases, class divisions are explicable in terms of these residues. The well known inability of the classes in Africa, both at the level of the elites and the masses, to unify themselves, is a case in point. Part of the explanation for this, Otite (1979: 93) avers, lies in "the attachment to the exclusive symbols of ethnicity (which) weakens class cultures as well as elite organisation and occupational colleagueship." In view of this, it is more accurate to say that ethnicity is both a dependent and an independent variable, depending on what aspects of it one is interested in.

The second suggestion that ethnicity is not employed by the non-elites is also objectionable. In the developed world represented by the USA, if Gans (1979) is to be believed, ethnicity is a working class ideology because it is at this level that most Americans suffer deprivations and inequalities. One implication of this claim would be that, in the long run, after the positions of the elite are consolidated with a material base in Africa and a full-fledged bourgeoisie emerges, ethnicity will become less of an elite-begotten ideology.[19] But, we do not even need to wait for the long-run to know that ethnicity is an ideology of both inter-elite and inter-non-elite competition. This has to be so if we accept that the ethnic strategy is always there to be used and, because it is not necessary for all members to agree on how to use it before it is put to use, its use is not restricted to the elites. Any member of the group—elite or non-elite—can employ it, depending on the situation in which he finds himself.

The findings of a recent research undertaken by this author in selected Nigerian towns lend ample support to this argument. One such finding is that although the famous ethnic (tribal) unions remain the corner stone of ethnicity in the towns, they are mostly organised by the masses who have proven to be more enthusiastic about preserving the ethnic interests especially in the areas of culture and language. It may be argued that even among these mass groups, there are clear leaders who constitute the "elite" and who may in fact manipulate the group to further their own interests. Such an argument is partly valid if we restrict the meaning of the term elites to only leaders. But even so, we know who the elites are in African societies: they are distinct and set apart from the masses mainly by their Western education, but also by their wealth, reputation, influence, connections with, and control of, government and its agencies, and so on. It is a mark of this elite distinction that side-by-side with the mass-organised ethnic unions, the elites have in most cases organised their own, more select ethnic "thought" groups which ostensibly pursue "nobler" ethnic interests.[20] For obvious reasons, it is the intellectual ethnic think-tank that constitutes the recruitment ground for appointment to top government positions and the awards of major contracts. But where such elite associations do not exist or prove inadequate to meet the elite needs, they have never failed to turn into the mass and its larger-organised ethnic unions.

The point I am making is that it would seem that the masses have recognised the interests the ethnic ideology can serve for them, different from those of the elite. They have also used the ethnic ideology towards these ends. My research further

showed why the non-elites find the ethnic strategy convenient. First, the urban masses in most Nigerian towns have more acute senses of ethnic differentiation and stereotypes than the elites (and it does not matter if they are simply living upon the foundation laid by the elites).[21] For example, non-elite parents are more likely to refuse the marriage of their children to partners from other groups than elite parents are. Second, being poor, unprivileged and deprived, urban non-elites find the ethnic connection a necessary condition for getting a job, a contract or promotion. For others, it is a convenient rationalisation for failure (Ayoade, 1983).

The elite perspective of ethnicity finally suffers from two serious conceptual defects which limit its empirical applicability. In the first place, the perspective underplays the situational character of ethnicity and the fact that it is a highly individualised form of political behaviour that depends on the particular situation, especially the behaviour of others. The approach emphasises the macro or group level of ethnicity to the detriment of the micro or I (and possibly we) level which, adherents of the situational school argue, is the more relevant framework for understanding ethnicity. On the balance, ethnicity is both a micro and a macro phenomenon and either of the two comes into play depending on the particular situation. If these points are well taken, it is easy to see that, since every actor in politics is assumed to be rational (of course this is central to the elite perspective), the ethnic ideology can be employed by anyone—elite and non-elite alike—as the situation dictates.

The second defect is closely related to the first, but it is more devastating. It is that the perspective treats the ethnic group as a homogeneous entity which unquestionably accepts the leadership of the elite and rises in support of it anytime the members are mobilised. This analytical error is made because the elite perspective fails to examine intra-group relations as an integral part of inter-group relations. In consequence, the elite perspective is unable "to deal with, or even comprehend, let alone predict, the ebb and flow of ethnicity...among particular peoples at different times, and the sometimes dramatic shifts in ethnic group identification (Brass, 1985: 31)." Mozaffar is more exact: because it ignores intra-group relations, the elite perspective fails to see that "ethnic groups in Africa are not internally cohesive social categories, but are differentiated along, and overlap with, various other lines of social cleavages such as age, class, education, etc. (Mosaffar, 1986: 8)." I have already referred to the situation in some Nigerian towns where ethnic groups are divided along elite-non-elite lines. If one does not undertake intra-group analysis, one would be misled into thinking that only the elites are the spokespersons of the groups. Apart from the fact that some members of the non-elite groups are bold enough to challenge the pretensions to leadership on the part of the part of the elites, there are a variety of reasons why elites in Africa do not necessarily lead their groups, even in political matters. These include: 1) some of the discerning non-elites recognise the self-serving ends of elite-begotten ethnic ideology, and challenge the leadership of the elite; 2) there are usually traditional or cultural procedures which may mitigate the influence of the elites on grounds of age, sex, family, secret society membership, and the like; and 3) the group may be divided according to wards, clans, villages, class or religion, thereby preventing a monolithic elite leadership.

So, the fact that the elites are, or are assumed to be, "the worst peddlars" of ethnicity does not make them the leaders of the ethnic group, nor does the fact that they are privileged and possess the most superior organisational skills. We have to find out how they relate with the rest of the group. Otherwise, we may actually be talking of ethnic leaders without ethnic constituencies.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have tried to argue that ethnicity is much more than an "ideology" (because it is real) or an elite affair (because it can be employed by any man acting rationally as the situation dictates). The elite perspective certainly is an important, even if partial, perspective of ethnic analysis, especially because it attempts to integrate class and ethnic analyses. But we must be careful not to fall into the fallacy of objectification, i.e. the assumption that ethnicity is unreal. As one leading author on ethnicity wrote a fairly long time ago: "...if one avoids an implicit and class analysis of ethnicity on the grounds that ethnicity is too often a concoction of manipulative elites, then of course one cannot fully comprehend under what conditions and for how long such a mode of control may persist. Failure to understand that seems to carry with it a far greater analytical danger than risking falling into an elite's conceptual framework. Ethnic categorisations have served political elites well, precisely when they have struck some vital nerves in a given collectivity. To contend that ethnicity is a potentially manipulative tool is not to say that it is 'unreal' (Enloe, 1978: 337–38)."
There is always the danger of saying so in an unqualified application of the elite perspective to ethnicity. Therefore, it should be applied along with other perspectives of ethnicity, particularly those which acknowledge elite-challenging ethnicity, to expand its analytical spectrum and increase its empirical applicability.

NOTES

(1) Most authors at the time even went ahead to distinguish between ethnicity which was supposedly a modern phenomenon and "tribalism" which was the hallmark of backward societies. Such perjorative connotations have featured less in recent writings, although some authors still insist that "African ethnicity" belongs to a special category of primordialism. Enloe (1973) refers to African ethnicity as "tribal ethnicity."

(2) Actually, elite theorists believe that an "ideology" is the name of the tool or strategy employed by the elites to manipulate the masses. Ideology has also been called "formula," "myth," and "derivation" (Bottomore, 1976: 7–20).

(3) What I mean is that much of the theoretical developments in the study of ethnicity is devoted to formulating paradigms of cross-cultural research notwithstanding the cultural peculiarities of ethnicity in individual cases. The problem in this, however, is that there is always the danger of underestimating the systemic factors which make ethnicity peculiar in each case. So, much as the across-the-board development is desirable, we should not fail to also look at the intra-system variables.

(4) Some authors do not, however, accept this view. Paul Mercier, one of such authors argues that "In the new states, ethnic identity does not always have a centrifugal effect; it can just as well be an integrative factor to the extent that the rules of a common game are explicitly or implicitly accepted. Ethnic identity can, in many different ways, contribute to unification or be utilised toward that end (Mercier, 1965: 486)." Unfortunately, Mercier does not tell us the ways in which this can be done.

(5) Geertz wrote within the modernisation framework, and argued that these "givens" were more problematic in the new states, where they impeded the success of the integrative revolution, than in the old states. This erroneous impression has been challenged by the many instances of unsuccessful integrative revolution in some of the so-called advanced states like Belgium, Canada and North Ireland.

(6) A good analysis of these perspectives can be found in Kasfir (1976) and McKay (1982).

(7) For example, holders of most of the other perspectives believe that ethnicity is mobilised by the "men of power" to further their interests.

(8) In fact, Magubane (1969: 538) has argued that focus on ethnicity beclouds any serious effort to understand African societies because it ignores ownership of the primary productive forces, the material hase of society and the nature of the social system. In a similar vein, Mafeje (1971: 253–55) argues that ethnicity 'oversimplifies' and 'obscures' the real nature of economic and power relations among Africans themselves, and between them and the capitalist world.

(9) Inglehart (1983) defines "elite-directed" political behaviour as involving the mobilisation of the (mass) publics by the elites through various manipulative mechanisms, in pursuit of goals chosen by them and in their interest. "Elite-challenging" behaviour by contrast, is a "bottom-up behavioural pattern which is mass-based and mass-led and directly challenges the goals of the elites.

(10) Plato and Aristotle wrote about the "guardians" and the "philosopher-kings" who were specially endowed with the art of ruling.

(11) In other words, every ethnic elite is assumed to be committed to promoting the collective interests of the minority group.

(12) He adds that this usually happens "when elites in conflict lack the bureaucratic apparatus or the instruments of violence to compete effectively...."

(13) This is usually because of the marked inequalities among the groups.

(14) As Ekeh (1975: 105) puts it, "Even the languages by which some claim to identify the ethnic group in (the) modern day...are, to a large extent, a product of (the) domain-partition ideology [of the elites]."

(15) According to Nagata (1976: 244), "ethnic categories or groups, irrespective of the objective conditions, which gave them birth, eventually come to generate myths of common origin...which function as a charter myth for their current existence, unity and common interests in much the same way that genealogies validate existing kinship ties and organisation. Like genealogies too, charter myths can be fabricated, refurbished and manipulated according to current need, but never losing their strong motivational power and emotional appeal."

(16) The famous Yoruba-Ibo conflicts of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s aptly illustrate the sharpening of this 'us' vs 'they' dichotomy.

(17) Under colonial rule, this process was gingered by the Africanisation policies that were embarked upon in the final days. In Nigeria, Africanisation easily became

regionalisation and ethnicisation.

(18) This approach, as the name suggests, combines ethnic analysis and class analysis.

(19) This argument closely resembles that made by modernisation scholars—that the underdeveloped states will develop to become like the developed states. This is not the place to re-open this fruitless controversy, but I think that it is a valid argument to the extent that the underdeveloped states accept models of development based on, and recommended by, the developed states.

(20) Often times, the interests of the elite groups and the masses groups conflict.

(21) One reason that could be proffered for this is that the masses have closer and more direct contact with their likes from other ethnic groups with whom they inhabit the densely populated urban slums. They are consequently more exposed to ethnic stimuli.

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